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AUTHOR Deseran, Forrest A.; Leinhardt, John
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ABSTRACT

Suggesting concrete operational procedures to stimulate discussion re: Objective B of the S-120 Regional Project (rural development), this paper focuses on key conceptual problems raised in a previous paper. The problem of cognitions or subjective worlds of actors is addressed in terms of Blumer's six features of public opinion; then, the delineation of relevant publics in developmental decision making is addressed. Perceptions of development as definition of the situation is the heading given to a section dealing with the basic question of how to link the process of development to the subjective worlds of pertinent actors (i.e., it is how actors define their situations, not how social scientists define them, that produces meaningful behavior). Three central cognitive dimensions or definitions of the situation are suggested: factual beliefs; evaluations; and relevances. The suggested operational proposals include: sample selection (development issues or events selected by each principle investigator and based upon "researchability"; selection of key individual actors based upon data available from the ranking scheme in the contact matrices; key organizations selected via a similar fashion); and actors' perceptions (the nature of the developmental issue or event itself; the problem of identifying publics; the actual decision making process; and assessments of the outcome of this decision process). (JC)

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ORGANIZATIONS AND CONSTITUENCIES: CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN DETERMINING RELEVANT PUBLICS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Forrest A. Deseran

and

John Leinhardt

Louisiana State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

This paper represents an initial attempt to respond to and suggest additional issues relative to the Voth draft (November 15, 1977). Our major focus will be on what we consider to be key conceptual problems raised by the Voth paper and to provide an empetus for further discussion concerning the implementation of Objective B of the S-120 Regional Project: "To determine perceptions toward development of: organizational officers, members involved in development activities, agency representatives, and clientele affected by organizational and agency activities."

Before discussing some of the issues inherent in such an objective, a few words about the rationale for Objective B are in order. This objective was included to provide an empirical link between the objective structural aspects of local decision-making processes and the actors' subjective orientations in these processes. In short, the intention was to include in the research some notion of the subjective worlds of the individuals identified as important in the decision-making transactions.

Two classes of issues inherent in this research enterprise suggest themselves. The first class of issues, which has been dealt with quite effectively by the Voth paper, involves the nature of the relationship between organizations and constituencies or clienteles. The second class of issues, with which we will grapple later in this paper, revolve around the problem of cognitions or subjective worlds of actors. It is logical

that addressing problems of identifying relevant actors in the research scheme should precede discussions of measuring cognitive orienations. We must have some idea of a relevant target population prior to attempts to assess cognitive properties of populations.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PUBLIC

Although alluded to in the Voth paper, the concept public is not explicitly defined. An examination of this concept will be helpful in placing what might be termed subsidiary concepts such as clientele or constituency in a larger and meaningful context. Despite the variety of approaches to the problem of the term public, we believe that it would be profitable to begin with something akin to Dewey's discussion of the nature of public whereby focus is on those who are affected by the consequences of transactions "to such an extent that it is necessity to have those consequences systematically cared for." (Dewey, 1927: 15-16). Several aspects of this approach are of particular pertinence for our purposes and warrent further discussion.

First, public is not conceived of as the "people at large." The central criterion for delineating a public from other possible social aggregates is the nature of the issue or event at hand. In this research, pertinent social transactions will refer to the decision-making process endemic to developmental change. This means that the problem of public remains an empirical question whose answer depends upon some knowledge of the type of issue as well as the nature of the transaction itself. As Shibutani (1966: 38) states, "publics...are transitory groupings that can be identified only in terms of the temporary sharing of a common object of attention, and their size and composition vary with each event."

However, as Shibutani continues his argument, "This does not mean... that a public is merely an amorphous aggregate of individuals; each public that persists tends to develop some kind of structure, though usually at a low level of formalization." (Pp. 38-39).

Perhaps the key aspect of this conceptualization of public relates to the definitive element that the issues involved require some control over the consequences by those responding to these issues. That is, the notion of public not only includes actors' awarenesses, but also involves a perceived necessity to systematically react to consequences. This observation in conjunction with the notion that publics tend to become structured is at the heart of this problem.

Herbert Blumer's (1969: 195-208) discussion of public opinion and public opinion polling, first delivered in 1947, remains appropriate for our present argument. It is our belief that by taking Blumer's criticisms seriously, we can at least arrive at a range of plausible possibilities for operationalizing Objective B of this project. It should be stressed that our purpose in presenting these ideas here are not to contend that Voth ignored these issues. Indeed, his paper very nicely complements and extends much of the argument. Rather, we are attempting to make explicit several themes which have been manifest in the S-120 project but which remain implicit. By articulating these themes, we may be in a better position to keep a bearing on our objectives and to be consistent in developing subsequent strategies of research.

Blumer suggests that six features of public opinion deserve sociological attention. As we briefly outline these features it should be quite apparent how they are applicable to our own concerns with development

in rural areas. The first feature is that public opinion must be assessed as a function of the social processes at work in which it is set. That is, public opinion can not be approached as an intity separate form existing empirical social interactions. Secondly, these social interactions occur in the context of diverse "functional groups." These groups, which can be identified in terms of interests, are distributed in society in terms of differential strategic positions and opportunities to act relative to objects of interest, i.e., "they differ in terms of prestige and power." Third, these groups, which have to act through available channels, are represented by "individuals, committees, boards, legislators, administrators, and executives who must make decisions affecting the outcome of the actions of functional groups." And these key persons are subject to direct or indirect influence or pressure from a variety of sources. Fourth, because of their unique positions relative to the issues at hand, these key individuals must take into account the opinions of other key individuals when arriving at their own decisions. Fifth, and this point is already implicit, the formation of public opinion "reflects the functional composition and organization of society." Here Blumer is stressing that public opinion is a function of the interrelationships among interest groups which themselves have differential attributes of power and influence. Finally, "in any realistic sense public opinion consists of the pattern of the diverse views on positions on the issue that come to the individuals who have to act in response to the public opinion" (p. 200, original emphasis).

With the foregoing in mind, we can now turn to the question of how to delineate relevant publics in developmental decision-making. As is

readily apparent, the methodological procedures already implemented in the S-120 project is directly applicable to the notion of public developed above. Our procedures have allowed us to take a first step in specifying the individuals and organizations which comprise a relevant public regarding developmental change. We therefore have data which will allow us to "map" the channels through with meaningful public opinion must flow. And the adjective "meaningful" is important here in the sense that we have the opportunity to identify the points in the existing social structure at which influence would be crucial.

Thus, we can argue that Voth's review of the "Bottom-up" and the "Top-down" perspectives is appropriate within this context. It is possible that the direction of influence, which is an important issue, will remain an empirical question to be discovered by our procedures. The important point here is the recognition of the salience of social structure in determining relevant public perceptions. Furthermore, the typology of organizations makes practical "sense", allowing a classificatory scheme based upon criteria essential to identifying relevant publics.

The typification of constituencies or clienteles as presented by Voth is also useful. However, assuming we accept the premises of the preceding discussion, we would argue that the "Grass-Roots" type public consisting of disparate individuals would be less useful for assessing the linkages between decision-making procedures and the potential influence or impact of subjective states in those procedures. As we have argued, meaningful influence occurs in the context of existing channels which are represented by a variety of types of interest groups. Agreeing with Voth's contention that it would be impossible to examine all types of publics,

our suggestion would be to not concern ourselves with the perceptions of grass-roots type publics. This is not to argue, though, that we should not make an attempt to identify potentially relevant aspects of such grass-roots publics, a topic we will address later in this paper.

While we have moved in the direction of identifying what we mean by public and typifying publics according to the criteria suggested by Voth, we are still in a dilemma regarding the procedures best suited for ascertaining the subjective worlds of the members of these publics. One point bears repeating. We have already established a starting point for identifying relevant publics. In the sense that our data reflects a public, albeit a restricted one, we have taken the first step toward ascertaining "who can answer the questions."

Specifying such publics then would involve a continuation of the methods employed, but directed at a rather restricted set of individuals and organizational representatives. In this way we can maintain continuity with our existing data and in fact fill in gaps created by questions which are inevitably created by the research processes. One thing we will be doing then is expanding our data to include more subjective substance to fill in our sociometric patterns. Before offering more specific suggestions for operationalizing publics therefore, we must discuss the nature of this subjective substance.

PERCEPTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT AS DEFINITION OF THE SITUATION[1]

The basic question is how to link the process of development, as operationalized in this research, to the subjective worlds of pertinent actors. The interrelationship between structural social phenomena (i.e.,

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[1]The development of this section is based upon a scheme presented in greater detail by Deseran (forthcoming). Much of the theoretical grounding for this argument is presented in that publication and will not be articulated here.

the decision-making structures) and emergent subjective assessments of such phenomena can perhaps be best conceptualized within the framework offered by the definition of the situation (Ball, 1972). For it is how actors define their situations, not how social scientists define them, that produces meaningful behavior. When researchers' theories coincide with actors' definitions of the situation we can say that the theoretical underpinnings of research endeavors have been subjectively validated. Thus, concern with definitions of the situation goes beyond descriptive assessments of the perceptions of individuals by linking subjective worlds to theoritical constructs. In addition, such definitions provide important data concerning the potential directions and likelyhood of behaviors related to the target situations.

But the problem of moving definitions of the situation from the purely conceptual realm to a workable research strategy remains. Pursuant to this end, we can suggest three central cognitive dimensions of definitions of the situation: factual beliefs, evaluations, and relevances.

(1) Factual beliefs. Factual beliefs provide perceptual frames of reference. Here we are referring to epistomological facticity as opposed to some ontological facticity which is ultimately subject to outside verification. Such beliefs are the basis of knowledge systems which are manifest in symbolic communication and provide what Berger and Luckmann (1966) refer to as a social stock of knowledge. Thus, an essential element of the subjective worlds of actors is their everyday knowledge. And definitions of the situation refer to the application by actors of this knowledge to specific circumstances. However, the full meaning of definitions of the situation transcend subjective factual content. Such

beliefs are necessary for assessment of definitions of the situation, but not sufficient to explain differential interpretations of "reality."

(2) Evaluation. Evaluation refers to the imputation of negative or positive attributes to phenomena. Although the nature of evaluation has been subject to extended discussion, for our purposes, evaluation is a characteristic of subjective reactions to situations which is distinguishable from factual beliefs. Although persons may agree "factually" about the purposes and nature of a proposed highway, for example, their evaluative responses may be quite different. As important as evaluative direction is for understanding subjectivity, we would argue that it is not sufficient to provide adequate assessments of the meaning a situation may have for an actor.

(3) Relevance. Relevance, is an integral yet often overlooked dimension of subjectivity. We are referring here to the degree to which individuals view situations as impinging upon their own lifespace and therefore representing the priority of concern attached to phenomena. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue, relevances become structured for a variety of reasons. Individual interests and goals determine in part those aspects of one's living environment which are of particular significance. Structural parameters (Blau, 1974) enhance or dimenish relevance as they facilitate or constrain lines of behavior. Superimposed on these factors are spatial and temporal realities which organize and channel phenomena within our perceptual field. Thus, relevance may be conceptualized as a type of cognitive proximics. Those features of living environments which are closed in cognitive time and space are likely to be most relevant.

The significance of relevance for the social scientist is that this dimension links the situation to individual behavior. That is, while evaluation suggests potential directions of behavior relative to specific circumstances, relevance tends to increase the propensity of behavior to occur in the first place. Sociologically, then, attention can be focused either on the personal aspects of relevance or on the structural determinants of relevance. In our current research effort we can argue that we have attempted to identify the social structural components of relevance (i.e., the decision-making structure) and that our next step is to subjectively validate this structure by providing the subjective substance of this structure.

OPERATIONAL PROPOSALS

The necessary task before us is to make some concrete operational suggestions for what have been up to now rather abstract ideas. It will become evident that our proposals reflect a theoretical tradition which may not be representative of other perspectives of members of this project. We are not proselytizing for our point of view. Our suggestions are offered in the spirit of stimulating discussion and hopefully evoking constructive criticism for an ultimate synthesis of ideas. We will begin our discussion with the problem of sample selection and then more to considerations of instrumentation, suggesting appropriate methodological strategies along the way.

Sample Selection

(1) Development Issues or Events. Each principle investigator should be responsible for selecting one of the specific issues or events in each

county as determined in the first phaze of the research. The criteria for selection should be based upon the "researchability" of the event or issue as determined by the data on hand. That is, based upon the researcher's knowledge of local developmental processes, events or issues should be selected which promise to provide the most distinctly identifiable sets of actors and behaviors.

(2) Key Individual Actors. Key influential actors could be selected based upon the data available from our ranking scheme in the contact matrices. Although the absolute number of key actors to be selected may be variable, five persons might be a manageable number for intensive research. Obviously, in cases where five persons were not identified as key actors the numbers would have to be fewer.

(3) Key Organizations. We could select key organizations similar to the selection of individuals. We could perhaps select the three organizations ranked highest in influence by the individuals in the matrix relative to the target issue or event would be most appropriate. Two types of operation would be central to the organizational level of analysis. First, we could prepare organizational profiles based upon organization documents or other local sources. This may entail such things as delineation of organizational goals and policy, membership roles, and pertinent actions relative to the issue or event. Such documentation would provide, as with the development events above, an empirical framework for probing key organizational personnel.

Once the organizations have been selected and described, key spokespersons or representatives could be selected. This could be approached from either a positionally (as determined by an organizational chart or

other such document) or reputationally (as derived through investigative processes similar to those we used in our initial sample). Ideally we may want to combine these strategies to derive a list of at least three key individuals from each identified organization.

It is likely that the key individuals or organization representatives would overlap. That is, the five individuals selected as key decision-makers may also be identified as key organizational representatives. This should pose no problem other than reducing the number of actors to be intensively studied. And given the nature of this aspect of the research, as shall be seen, fewer respondents may be desirable.

Perceptions of Actors

Development of procedures for determining the perceptions of key actors is perhaps the most difficult task before us. It is our belief that we will have to go beyond strict quantifiable procedures to include qualitative type analyses of the decision-making processes. This means that we may want to consider a variety of techniques as opposed to depending on one comprehensive questionnaire. Our proposals, after intensive reflection on the problems, remain preliminary and obviously remain open to suggestion.

In what "perceptions" are we interested? Several general categories of pertinent perceptions suggest themselves: (1) The nature of the developmental issue or event itself. (2) The problem of identifying publics. (3) The actual decision-making process. And (4) assessments of the outcome of this decision process. We will discuss each of these separately.

(1) The Development Issue or Event and Individual Actors. The actor's own definition of the development event or issue is central to

our concerns. We need to determine the actor's assessment of this event or issue in relation to other related issues and events. For example, regarding the decision to build a new hospital, we would be interested in the actor's view of how this impacts or is impacted by related issues such as local support from doctors, existing health delivery systems, economic constraints, competing facilities in neighboring counties, etc. We may want to organize this in terms of economic, political, and social constraints and/or facilitators. Such perceptions could be categorized as factual beliefs regarding the development event.

Secondly, we would be interested in determining the actor's evaluative stance regarding the issue or event delineated above. That is, does the actor view the actual or potential outcome as highly desirable. Here we could ask the actor to rate the event against some benchmark criteria such as possible political, economic, and social outcomes. Or perhaps we could ask the actor to rate the desirability of the event in relation to other developmental possibilities. Because of our research strategy for selecting key actors, the likelihood is high that the actor will be favorable toward the event. Thus, we may want to tie the assessment in with the questionning related to factual beliefs.

Finally, we would want to make an assessment of the relevance of the event or issue for the actor. This could be determined by asking how the event or issue stacks up in terms of importance relative to other issues and events identified in the first phaze of the research. We would thus be determining the cognitive priority of the event or issue. Furthermore, we could probe to attempt to determine how the outcome of the event or issue facilitates or constrains the actor's own position in terms of

power or prestige. That is, how much personal commitment has been invested in this decision? What are the consequences of the outcome for the actor?

(2) The Development Issue or Event and Organizations. The same three types of questions relating to development events or issues could be asked of organization representatives, but could be couched in terms of the organization. I.e., what is the "official" position on the issue or event in terms of the Chamber of Commerce? Does the Chamber consider this to be a positive or negative event or issue? To what degree is this event or issue relevant to the Chamber? Again, we may want to ask overlapping individuals to answer these questions in these two formats.

(3) Publics. Now our focus shifts to the problem of identifying relevant publics. Keeping the concepts of constituencies and clienteles in mind, we could probe actors to devulge who in their decision-making environments are seen as relevant. That is, who do they imagine the reactions of when engaged in decision-making. Here we can refer to constituencies as being significant others related to specific decisions. As we have made clear, our research procedures should have identified many of the significant others which should be manifest in the matrices. One way of determining subjective "maps" relative to these significant others would be to ask the actors to place these others in terms of their importance relative to the actor in the particular decision-making event. One way of doing this might be to provide respondents with a game-board or similar device depicting the respondent in the center and asking the respondent to place markers representing other key actors and/or organizations around the center in accordance to their degree of influence on the actor's own

decision processes. In this way we could get a general notion of the actor's perceptions of the "place" of each other actor. Perhaps grid marks on the map could "measure" the distance of each relevant actor from the respondent. This procedure would allow a subjective validation or check on the "maps" developed from the original matrices. Comparisons of subjective maps may allow us to better get an idea of how decision-makers see themselves relative to others (constituencies) involved in the process.

Such a procedure could also be used to place individuals and/or organizations relative to particular events. Instead of using the respondent as the focal point of the "map", we sould use the target event. In this way we would be able to get a better idea of how the individual sees himself or herself relative to the event. In essence, we are asking actors to give us their perceptions in a Gestalt sense what we are attempting to derive through discrete indicators such as frequency of contact, direction or contact, and ranking influence.

The problem of clienteles might be approached in terms of "generalized others". Following a Meadean line of thought, we would be interested in the actor's perceptions of whose interests he or his organization serve in a general sense. Here we are approaching the notion of a grass-roots clientele. As we argued earlier in this paper, it would not be feasible to identify the grass-roots public for purposes of obtaining representative perceptions of such a public. But it would be possible within the constraints of our resources to ascertain how significant actors visualize this aspect of the public. We could ask our respondents to characterize the public they had in mind when fulfilling their decision-making roles

relative to the target event. This is problematic and we have not reached any conclusions on how best to do this. One method which has been used by one of the authors in other research may be to ask respondents to answer a varient of the Twenty-Statements-Test, "Who are they?" Responses to such a question (in the twenty-statements format) would allow analysis of key actors' relatively open-ended answers. It is possible that such data would reveal notions about characteristics of the grass-roots public (i.e., socio-economic status, racial composition, education level, etc.). We may also be interested in determining the actors' notions about the general reaction of this generalized other.

(4) Lessons Learned. Finally, an important type of subjective information relates to the actors' own assessments of the outcome of the decision-making process. In short, we should systematically determine what major factors are seen as having led to the success or failure of specific development events. Much like the common question asked on dissertation defenses, we could ask actors' if they had a chance to "do it again", what would they do differently and why. This would relate to considerations of both internal and external constraints and facilitators to the development process. Such information should prove very useful for moving to our last objective of developing models of development which could prove useful to those who are actively engaged in the everyday world of decision-making.

One closing remark is in order. Although the strategies suggested here appear to be lengthy and time-consuming, our experience in three parishes in Louisiana so far have led us to believe that the target

subjects would be willing and able to provide the essential information. Our major concern should be to have a well organized and clearly articulated plan before going to the field.

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